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Claire Langhamer

## The Meanings of Home in Postwar Britain

In November 1959 the British social scientist Mark Abrams used the pages of *The Listener* to draw attention to an apparently new postwar development:

... for the first time in modern British history the working-class home, as well as the middle-class home, has become a place that is warm, comfortable, and able to provide its own fireside entertainment — in fact, pleasant to live in. The outcome is a working-class way of life which is decreasingly concerned with activities outside the house or with values wider than those of the family.<sup>1</sup>

This ‘home-centred society’, founded on cross-class affluence, was described as exhibiting a number of novel features, including re-worked gender roles (the ‘domesticated husband’ and ‘chooser and spender’ wife) and family-focused leisure. In effect, it was claimed that the years immediately following the second world war witnessed the triumph of a comfortable, consumer-bound and increasingly privatized domestic lifestyle accessible to all.

A businessman as well as researcher, Abrams’s commitment to consumer research saw him implicitly promoting lifestyles founded on consumerism: certainly the veracity of his findings on youth spending patterns has been challenged by recent work.<sup>2</sup> However, Abrams was not alone in identifying the increasing domestication of postwar British society as a central and distinctive development. Graham Crow has argued that:

It is ... in this period that the modern domestic ideal of an affluent nuclear family living in a home of their own and enjoying the benefits of leisurely home life took shape, with emphasis placed on the privacy of the individual household rather than the wider community.<sup>3</sup>

In a more overtly critical vein, Lynne Segal describes the ‘tense domesticity and anxious conformity of the fifties, when a seemingly endless and all-embracing consensus held sway throughout almost every Western nation’.<sup>4</sup> James Obelkevich notes simply that ‘the one post-war trend that stands out above all the rest is the growing significance of the home’.<sup>5</sup> In Britain, as elsewhere in

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I would like to thank the editors of this special issue, the *JCH* referees, Alex Shepard and Nick Hayes for their very helpful comments on this article.

1 M. Abrams, ‘The Home-centred Society’, *The Listener*, 26 November 1959, 914–15.

2 B. Osgerby, *Youth in Britain since 1945* (Oxford 1998), 24–6.

3 G. Crow, ‘The Post-war Development of the Modern Domestic Ideal’ in G. Allan and G. Crow (eds), *Home and Family. Creating the Domestic Sphere* (Basingstoke 1989), 20.

4 L. Segal, *Straight Sex. The Politics of Pleasure* (London 1994), 4.

5 J. Obelkevich and P. Catterall, *Understanding Postwar British Society* (London 1994), 144.

Europe, the modern home and its inhabitants were represented as the symbolic, and actual, centre of postwar reconstruction.

The central aim of this article is to explore the meanings of 'home' in postwar Britain: how was home situated in public discourse and what was the relationship between public perception, individual desire and material reality? The article will consider the extent to which the British home was re-made in these years, asking whether domesticity 1950s-style was distinct from the modern domesticity that a number of historians have identified in the 1930s,<sup>6</sup> considering whether gender roles were differently configured in the Cold War era and exploring the degree of penetration achieved by the home-centred model.

The article draws upon life history sources and social survey materials that allow access to subjective understandings of 'home'. In particular it employs evidence collected by the pioneering British social investigative organization, Mass-Observation. Mass-Observation was established in 1937, with the avowed aim of constructing 'an anthropology of everyday lives', generating material into the 1950s. Its approach was eclectic but included observational research, the solicitation of diaries and the collection of responses to a monthly 'directive', a series of open-ended questions on particular topics sent by the organization to a panel of volunteers. In 1981 the directive system was revived and a 'new' and ongoing Mass-Observation Archive was created. In its totality, Mass-Observation offers 'an interminable attention to the daily'.<sup>7</sup> This research draws upon 'old' and 'new' Mass-Observation to explore both historically-sited meanings of home and recently-solicited memories of the postwar period.<sup>8</sup>

As a number of studies have ably demonstrated, attention to 'home' allows for intervention in a number of debates around the nature of social change in the middle years of twentieth-century Britain.<sup>9</sup> Significant social, cultural and economic developments such as changes in the nature of 'work' and technology; demographic and emotional shifts; rising standards of living and postwar patterns of immigration all informed, and were informed by, the nature and status of the British home.<sup>10</sup> This article will show that there was much that was new in the postwar British home: the impact of war and a changed economic context wielded a major influence both materially and discursively. Yet the new was sometimes not quite *that* new. In a number of ways it was dreams and aspirations first formulated in the 1930s which were realized in

6 For a review of the field see A. Bingham, 'An Era of Domesticity? Histories of Women and Gender in Interwar Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, 1, 2 (2004), 225–33.

7 B. Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory. An Introduction* (London 2002), 75.

8 For more on Mass-Observation see D. Sheridan, B. Street and D. Bloome, *Writing Ourselves. Mass-Observation and Literary Practices* (Cresskill, NJ 2000).

9 See, for example, W. Webster, *Imagining Home: Gender, 'Race' and National Identity, 1945–64* (London 1998); J. Giles, *Women, Identity and Private Life in Britain, 1900–50* (Basingstoke 1995); A. Light, *Forever England. Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (London 1991).

10 This article does not directly address the relationship between postwar migration and meanings of home. For a comprehensive study of this area see Webster, *op. cit.*

the 1950s. More specifically, pre-existing demographic trends framed and fuelled the desire for, and possibility of, a more home-centred way of life, whilst 'modern' domesticity pre-dated the end of the war. Furthermore, if one legacy of the 1930s was the desire for a modern home, another was the impossibility, for some, of attaining it. Even at the end of the 1950s significant sections of the British population remained excluded from the home-centred society: housing need remained a crucial political issue. Fundamentally, then, a focus upon the home, its significance, meanings and the lived experiences and relationships within it allows us to explore the tension between past, present and future within postwar Britain and encourages us to see the 1950s as 'a period of instability rather than unthinking smug conventionality'.<sup>11</sup>

In October 1942 Mass-Observation asked its panel of largely, but not exclusively, middle-class volunteer contributors the question: 'What does "home" mean to you?'<sup>12</sup> Responses suggested that 'the majority of people, men and women equally, consider their home of great importance, and many regard it as the centre of their life'.<sup>13</sup> It is not, perhaps, surprising that at the height of war, individual men and women looked to 'home' as a centring value in their lives. As Leora Auslander demonstrates in her article in this issue, the loss, or potential loss, of home has symbolic as well as material consequences. For example, one male respondent observed that:

Home means being on leave, and the complete relaxation that means. Leisure, quiet, privacy, courtesy, relative luxury and comfort, forgetfulness of the army and all idiocy and petty oppression, muddle, hurry and noise and squalor and discomfort, anxiety and worry. . . . I never appreciated home before the war so much as I do now.<sup>14</sup>

For women, too, the circumstances of wartime intensified a longing for home, as this woman's response indicates: 'Home means to me a place of my own where I can have my own things and be on my own and invite my own friends. In fact, the antithesis of a billet.'<sup>15</sup> For these and other respondents the experience of war enhanced the significance of home: fantasies of 'home', at a number of different levels, provided a counterpoint to, and explanation for, war itself.

Yet elsewhere, the ways in which the panel articulated their attachment to home suggests a simultaneous 'looking backwards' and 'looking forwards' — a pivot between a home life experienced by some but desired by many in the 1930s, and the material reality of the 1950s experience where some, though not all, of those dreams were realized. Chief among the meanings ascribed to

11 L. Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain since 1880* (Basingstoke 2000), 166.

12 Mass-Observation Archive (hereafter M-OA), Directive Replies (hereafter DR), October 1942, 'Home'.

13 M-OA File Report (hereafter FR) 1616, 3 March 1943, unpaginated.

14 M-OA FR 1616, 2.

15 M-OA FR 1616, 8.

home by the 1942 directive respondents were those of 'relaxation, freedom and comfort'. As one 45-year-old woman teacher put it:

Home means to me, warmth, shelter and peace, a place where I can be myself, to relax when necessary, to have my own possessions near me and to use them when I wish: a place where I can work at my own speed and not keep to a time-table as I have to usually — or not work at all; a place where I can choose my own radio music, keep my own books, pictures and flowers, and move furniture around for a change, and the place where I can feel safe.<sup>16</sup>

An association of home with a privatized, family life was important to both men and women. For one man, home was 'the place where one is in the company of the person or people whom one loves best'. A female panellist observed that: 'You never realize what home means to you until you have founded one yourself and created a family of your own. To us it means all, security, happiness, comradeship', whilst another stated that: 'Home means the spot where I can keep my family safe and sheltered and private.'<sup>17</sup>

Whilst home as a place of relaxation, freedom, peace and privacy was a central motif, home as the location for personal artefacts, a place associated with actual physical comfort and a psychic space within which to establish and develop personal and family identities were also significant factors. For one man home meant 'a loving wife, an easy chair, a comfortable bed, a real cup of coffee, a good wireless set, a number of books . . .'.<sup>18</sup> Unsurprisingly in view of its status as a work place, as well as a living space, more women than men highlighted the physical environment of home as a significant factor. As Mass-Observation noted, 'It matters more to the ordinary woman that her home should be aesthetically furnished, that it should be light and practical to run.'<sup>19</sup> In contrast, more men than women defined home as 'the pivot of their life'. As a 39-year-old from Yeovil put it:

. . . [home means] practically everything. It's mighty fine to come home after a long day to see the wife and hear the kids. To have a tea which always is above minimum requirements and then, in summer, to poke around in the garden, in winter to sit on top of the fire, to read or fall asleep.<sup>20</sup>

These gender differences in the meaning of home reflect both the different roles played by men and women within the home and the ways in which the private and public distinction was mediated by gender. It was, nonetheless, left to a female panellist to anticipate a central theme of postwar domestic life in Britain when she stated that:

I believe it is in the building up of home life that our future greatness depends. This setting, the solidarity in families, is still the best ideal of life; it is here that the old, young and middle-aged get each other's point of view. A happy home and family life is the bulwark of a Nation.<sup>21</sup>

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16 M-OA DR, October 1942, 'Home' no. 1048.

17 M-OA FR 1616, 4–5.

18 M-OA FR 1616, 6.

19 M-OA FR 1616, 11.

20 M-OA DR, October 1942, 'Home' no. 2697.

21 M-OA FR 1616, 9.

The view that 'a happy home and family life is the bulwark of a Nation' might indeed be taken as *the* blueprint for postwar reconstruction in Britain. While the British Welfare State placed family maintenance at its centre, explicit concerns around population decline and rates of marriage failure were evident in the setting-up of the Royal Commission on Population (1945–49) and the Report into Procedure in Matrimonial Causes (1946–49). Such anxieties were closely linked to the availability of suitable locations within which family life could be re-established and safeguarded. In July 1945, *Picture Post* outlined a plan to 'get the houses' needed in the postwar world.<sup>22</sup> The article began with a letter from an ex-serviceman which exemplifies the extent to which aspirations for family life were obstructed by the lack of actual homes:

I am 27 years old and have just been discharged after 5 years in the Service. I intended getting married in May, and settling down to start a family. For the last six months I have been trying to find a house, a flat, anything, where we could live. But nothing doing. The best we have been able to get so far, is our name on a never, never council list, an offer of a furnished flat at four guineas a week, and a house, bomb damaged, at £1,500. All this out of my wages, £6 per week as a clerk, before deductions. Well, I have decided with my fiancée that after being engaged for three years, we are going to keep on being engaged till we get somewhere to live. We don't want to live with her parents or mine. We have seen too many marriages go wrong that way. And we aren't going to bring up our children, living in furnished rooms. What's happened to the better Britain you promised us a couple of years ago? When we needed guns, the government found them. When we needed planes, the Government found them. We want houses. So what about it?

For *Picture Post* in 1945, the housing question continued to be 'more than a personal problem, it [was] a problem for the nation'.

Certainly, the rebuilding of British housing stock concerned policy-makers from an early stage in the planning process: the devastation wrought by wartime bombing ensured that this was unavoidable. Moreover, the 'people's war' rhetoric encouraged a people's participation in housing planning. Beyond the government-sponsored Dudley Committee, a number of other bodies attempted to discern the housing preferences of the British with the aim of influencing the rebuilding of the nation. In its 1943 report, *An Enquiry into People's Homes*, Mass-Observation set itself the task of recording views on postwar housing stating that: 'However compressed, uninformed and contradictory the feelings and opinions of ordinary citizens may be, it is these opinions which must either be met or modified and led into new channels by planners.'<sup>23</sup>

As we will again see when we examine responses to the Britain Can Make It exhibition of 1946, the feelings and opinions which people brought to the postwar home help to account for the lively dialogue between past and present values evident in the reconstructed home. Although broadly satisfied with their present domestic situation, those surveyed by Mass-Observation in 1943

22 *Picture Post*, 28, 2, 14 July 1945, 16–17.

23 Mass-Observation, *An Enquiry into People's Homes* (London 1943), 5.

were quite willing to offer descriptions of what the organization explicitly described as 'dream homes of the future':

On the whole, people (notably housewives) are very long-suffering as far as their housing conditions are concerned, and are inclined to put up with much. At the same time, they are quite capable of envisaging the sort of home they like. They are ready to help the planners and architects to build it for them.<sup>24</sup>

In fact, 49 per cent of those surveyed would ideally have liked to live in a small house with a garden; 10 per cent wanted to live in a bungalow (a finding which surprised the survey-makers) and flats were by far the most unpopular of housing types.<sup>25</sup> Other wartime studies produced similar conclusions.<sup>26</sup> Privacy, self-containment and plenty of labour-saving devices were central to these visions of the future.

'Dream homes' were not, of course, simply buildings. 'Home' is a fluid concept, open to multiple meanings: a house is not necessarily a home. As outlined by Richard Hoggart in his semi-autobiographical account of working-class culture, the 'good' working-class home boasted warmth and a 'good table' — by which was meant the full provision of tasty, not necessarily wholesome food.<sup>27</sup> For Hoggart, home was, and had long been, the centre of working-class life. As he explained: 'Where almost everything else is ruled from outside, is chancy and likely to knock you down when you least expect it, the home is yours and real: the warmest welcome is still "Mek y'self at 'ome".'<sup>28</sup>

One 1950s study of working-class life in a Yorkshire mining community found that cosiness, 'a combination of warmth and comfort', was the most important quality of the 'ideal' home, followed by tidiness and cleanliness.<sup>29</sup> The emphasis upon a cosy home life represented the persistence of past meanings of home; the ability to maintain higher standards of cleanliness represented a material postwar gain. This mixing of old and new meanings of home was also evident in the working-class community surveyed by Madelaine Kerr in the first five years of the 1950s when she observed that:

In homes, the new things are absorbed into the kind of whole instinctively reached after. The old tradition is being encroached upon, here as in so many other areas. But the strong sense of the importance of home ensures that change is taken slowly.<sup>30</sup>

Certainly, for the people of Ship Street, Liverpool, the home was simply too highly valued to allow wholesale, rapid change. Home was an all-consuming

24 Ibid., xxiv.

25 Ibid., xxiii.

26 M. Clapson, 'The Suburban Aspiration in England since 1919', *Contemporary British History*, 14, 1 (2000), 156.

27 R. Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (1957, London 1992), 37.

28 Ibid., 34.

29 N. Dennis, F. Henriques and C. Slaughter, *Coal is our Life. An Analysis of a Yorkshire Mining Community* (1956, London 1969), 179.

30 M. Kerr, *The People of Ship Street* (London 1958), 40.



and constant factor: 'The Ship-Streeter's pivot is his home. He is born, nursed, brought up, cared for when sick, and eventually dies, under the supervision of the Mum.'<sup>31</sup>

Neither cosiness nor the wider negotiation between old and new were evident amongst working-class home-makers alone. The middle classes could demonstrate a similar commitment to domestic warmth and this is particularly evident in responses gathered by Mass-Observation in its study of the autumn 1946 Britain Can Make It exhibition.<sup>32</sup> Designed as a morale-boosting indication of Britain's manufacturing potential, Britain Can Make It included amongst its attractions numerous domestic goods including furniture, furnishings and fabrics, ceramics and domestic appliances as well as furnished rooms. The overall effect was to present an optimistic vision of the well-designed, if not readily available, British home. And yet, 'good' design did not always solicit popular approval. As one housewife married to an engineer told Mass-Observation's researchers: 'I don't like the ultra-modern designs — I like what's cosy and neat.'<sup>33</sup> Another woman claimed upon leaving the exhibition that: 'My tastes haven't been changed for the simple reason that I have got a cosy and comfortable home, as nice as any I have seen.'<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Mass-Observation found that the terms 'modern' and 'old-fashioned' were deployed by visitors to the exhibition with variable qualitative meanings attached to them: 'They can both be anything from high praise to derision.'<sup>35</sup> Old and new were not static concepts within the context of home life: the old could be as valued as the new within the postwar world.

Certainly a cross-class dream of attaining a 'home of one's own' was not new to the postwar period: it had a persuasive appeal for middle- and working-class men and women able to rent or buy homes beyond the slum conditions of inner city life in the years up to the second world war as well as beyond.<sup>36</sup> In the years before and after the war, this dream became a reality for ever-growing numbers. Four million new homes were built during the interwar period, of which 1.5 million were state-aided: the postwar Labour government presided over the building of 900,000 new houses and by 1957 2.5 million flats and homes had been constructed, the majority by local authorities.<sup>37</sup> Large-scale slum clearance schemes and the development of new estates

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31 Ibid., 38–9.

32 Mass-Observation employed 15 field investigators to conduct 2523 direct and informal interviews to ascertain knowledge about and reactions to the Exhibition. For a helpful collection of essays on the Britain Can Make It exhibition see P.J. Maguire and J.M. Woodham (eds), *Design and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain. The Britain Can Make It Exhibition of 1946* (Leicester 1997).

33 M-OA, FR 2441, '“Britain Can Make It” Exhibition', 26 November 1946, Section B, 13.

34 Ibid., 22.

35 Ibid., 13.

36 J. Giles, 'A Home of One's Own. Women and Domesticity in England 1918–1950', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 16, 3 (1993), 239–53.

37 J. Burnett, *A Social History of Housing 1815–1985* (London 1986), 249, 286.



actively changed both the physical environment of home and the meanings invested in home and community life.

In the postwar period the political meanings of housing became ever more significant and it was consistently central to political debate throughout the 1940s and 1950s. The protracted nature of the second world war, the social dislocation effected by large-scale evacuation schemes and the geographical mobility of civilian war-workers, as well as servicemen and women, fostered both an intensified romance with home life as well as pressing practical needs which demanded political solutions. The V-1 and V-2 attacks of 1944–45, for example, damaged or destroyed nearly one-and-a-half million houses.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, one recent study suggests that the failure to provide homes contributed significantly to Churchill's electoral defeat in 1945.<sup>39</sup> Writing in *Picture Post* in November 1945, the MP Barbara Castle outlined the nature of 'operation housing' by explicitly using war imagery and vocabulary.<sup>40</sup> Later in that decade optimistic accounts of wartime reconstruction found their way onto the pages of the same publication. For example, in January 1949 under the headline 'Housing: London shows the way', the rebuilding of Stepney was held up as a model of the transformative power of planning:

Many of these flats contain four rooms, a utility room, a drying balcony, a sun balcony, and a boiler in the kitchen to provide domestic hot water, or else gas or electric water-heaters. All living rooms will have open fires. What a contrast to the rooms pictured by Charles Dickens!<sup>41</sup>

Nonetheless, a public opinion survey of the same year found that the Labour government's second most outstanding failure was being 'too slow with housing'.<sup>42</sup>

The difference that new housing provision could make to the quality of family life was considerable, even where the actual gains appear quite modest. For example, one oral history interviewee, who married during the war and lived with her mother until the birth of her second son in 1947, described the delight she felt upon moving into a postwar prefabricated house:

We thought that was lovely, houses having bathrooms, you know. You had a tin bath in the yard and it came in front of the fire on Friday night. You had your bath in there. Told everybody else to clear out while you had your bath. But the prefab had a bathroom, and a fridge. So we were well off then. And a garden.<sup>43</sup>

38 Geraldine Ann Robinson, 'An Investigation into the Emergency Factory-made House of 1944', DPhil thesis, University of Sussex (2003), 489.

39 Ibid., 513.

40 *Picture Post*, 29, 7, 17 November 1945, 10–11.

41 *Picture Post*, 42, 4, 22 January 1949, 7–8.

42 *Picture Post*, 44, 6, 6 August 1949, 34–5.

43 Interview with Hannah, a working-class woman born in 1916 who married in 1942 and was a postwar housewife. These oral history interviews were conducted in 1994 as part of a wider project on women's leisure in twentieth-century England. For more details of the interview practice see C. Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England, 1920–1960* (Manchester 2000).

Despite their wider emphasis upon a supposedly alienating loss of 'community' and social solidarity attendant upon the move from Bethnal Green to the LCC estate they fictitiously called 'Greenleigh',<sup>44</sup> Young and Willmott's mid-1950s study, *Family and Kinship in East London*, also found evidence of the clear material gains presented by postwar housing provision. "When we first came we were thrilled", said Mrs Lowrie, explaining that their home in Bethnal Green had been so small that meals had to be eaten in relays. "Back in Bethnal Green we had mice in two rooms", said Mrs Sandeman. "After that this seemed like paradise."<sup>45</sup> Evidence from Birmingham, Salford and Oxford also emphasizes working-class approval of postwar estate life and has been used to contest Young and Willmott's negative, and influential, assessment of the new communities.<sup>46</sup>

And yet neither 'mod-con'<sup>47</sup> living nor the basic privacy of a home of one's own, however defined, were universal experiences during this period. 'Old' problems persisted, in sub-standard housing, lack of basic amenities and, fundamentally, a shortage of available housing.<sup>48</sup> A widely-expressed desire to re-establish marital and family life in the years after the war, seen most clearly in the postwar baby-boom which allayed population fears even before the Royal Commission on Population had reported, in reality saw countless young couples compelled to live with their parents or other relatives. The continuing strains that this created even at the end of the period considered here were documented by the Population Investigation Committee/Gallup Poll survey of 1959–61 that found that access to housing was the most frequently articulated concern among married couples. Analysing this data, Rachel Pierce noted the 'disturbing finding' that only a quarter of married couples were able to begin their married life living independently.<sup>49</sup> In their Bethnal Green study Young and Willmott found that:

In Bethnal Green few couples have much choice at the start of their marriage. They have to find space under a roof belonging to someone else, and, since there is little enough of that, they have to put up with what they can get. So it is not surprising that many couples begin their married life in the parental home.<sup>50</sup>

In fact, nearly half of the couples they surveyed lived with parents immediately after marriage. Nonetheless, the fantasy of a 'home of your own' was strongly

44 'Greenleigh' was actually the Debden estate in South Essex.

45 M. Young and P. Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957, London 1962), 127.

46 M. Clapson, 'The Suburban Aspiration in England since 1919', *Contemporary British History*, 14, 1 (2000), 158–9. See also idem, *Invincible Green Suburbs, Brave New Towns* (Manchester 1998).

47 The term 'mod. con.' was first used in a housing advertisement in *Punch* magazine on 24 January 1934, meaning any amenity or appliance regarded as typical of a well-equipped modern home.

48 See, for example, 'The Best and Worst of British Housing', *Picture Post*, 62, 13, 27 March 1954, 37.

49 Rachel M. Pierce, 'Marriage in the Fifties', *The Sociological Review* (March 1963), 233.

50 Young and Willmott, op. cit., 31.

held by all married couples, 'for most people anything else is second best'.<sup>51</sup> An assumed relationship between marital contentment and domestic location is evident in a 'true story of real people', which appeared in *Woman* magazine in 1954. Entitled 'The house that mended a marriage', the story explained why Joyce and Henry Harris were 'the happiest married couple in Britain'.<sup>52</sup> A marriage which had disintegrated under the pressure of living with parents was revived by the experience of home-building, chiefly because Henry had held firm to the belief that: 'If only we could get our own house, our marriage would be success. There was nothing wrong with our love.'<sup>53</sup>

Even where homes were available, they sometimes bore little resemblance to the 'ideal' homes promoted by exhibitions and domestic magazines. Mass-Observation's study of Britain Can Make It demonstrates that individual men and women were acutely aware of this disjuncture between modern designs and practical reality: 'Nine out of ten people would like items that they have seen in the Exhibition in their own homes: yet less than half that number *believe that they will ever have them*.'<sup>54</sup> In her mid-1950s study of Ship Street, Madelaine Kerr found that:

Frequently, several rooms in a house are out of use owing to damp, the ceiling having collapsed and caused general disrepair. Few houses have electric light. Most have gas, though one or two still use oil lamps. Most, too, have only cold water taps. In one case, water has to be brought from a tap in the yard. The flats, being newer, are of course better equipped and most have bathrooms.<sup>55</sup>

In another northern city, Manchester, the 1951 Census Returns demonstrate that 41 per cent of households did not have exclusive use of a fixed bath and only 56 per cent could claim exclusive use of piped water, cooking stove, kitchen sink, water closet and fixed bath.<sup>56</sup> By 1961 over a quarter of Manchester families were without the use of a fixed bath and nearly one-fifth were without the use of a hot water tap.<sup>57</sup> These figures provide clear evidence of the persistence of pre-war conditions and suggest that postwar discourses of classlessness had little foundation in material circumstance. As Mass-Observation had noted back in 1943, 'Whether or not a house possesses a bathroom has become a major social dividing line'.<sup>58</sup> This type of distinction continued well into the postwar world with, of course, fundamental implications for the nature of work within the home.

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51 Ibid., 33.

52 *Woman*, 15 May 1954, 53.

53 Ibid.

54 M-OA, FR 2441, Section B, 30. Emphasis in the original.

55 Kerr, op. cit., 27.

56 *Census of England and Wales 1951*, County of Lancashire, 153.

57 *Census of England and Wales 1961*, County Report, Lancashire, 393.

58 Mass-Observation, *An Enquiry into People's Homes*, op. cit., xiii.

While the materiality of some postwar homes suggests that the home-centred society achieved only partial penetration, a widely-expressed *desire* for a different type of home life certainly pre-dated the 1950s. The most significant manifestation of this desire was a demographic shift towards smaller families and near universal marriage at ever-younger ages. The first half of the century witnessed a decline in the birth-rate of such rapidity that the two-child family was firmly established as a norm by the end of the interwar years. The period between 1930 and 1950 was also, as Pat Thane has observed, 'the golden age, indeed the only age, of the near universal, stable, long-lasting marriage, often considered the normality from which we have since departed'.<sup>59</sup> Both phenomena were key constituents of what one historian described in the 1980s as the 'modern life cycle'.<sup>60</sup> Both had significant implications for the nature and meaning of home and offered the possibility of a more intimate home life during the central years of the century. The timing of these demographic trends makes unsupportable claims that the postwar period witnessed either a return to 'traditional' patterns of family life or the emergence of entirely new forms. Yet when combined with rising affluence, a nation primed for consumption and the (eventual) availability of goods for purchase, they informed the idea and practice of home life in postwar Britain, framing aspirations, family relationships, housing plans and demand for homes. Perhaps their most widely-perceived impact, however, was in encouraging the rise of domestic privacy.

A more privatized home life was both dream and reality for middle-class, and increasing numbers of working-class, families prior to the second world war. The Wythenshawe council housing development in 1930s Manchester actively encouraged a commitment to privacy and an intense family-based lifestyle: 'In most oral evidence from Wythenshawe residents a favourable contrast is drawn between the new estate, where people kept themselves to themselves, and the intrusive older communities.'<sup>61</sup> Moreover, even within crowded working-class housing, a premium was placed on the ability to mark out at least some measure of privacy within everyday life.<sup>62</sup> These tendencies grew in the years that followed. Mass-Observation noted in 1943 that:

The desire for privacy, for keeping oneself to oneself, is a powerful motive in modern society; people wanted to be 'all on our own like', and liked to have their own street door. Whatever people may think of their neighbours in the street or the people they meet shopping or going down town, they definitely like to have their home to themselves.<sup>63</sup>

59 P. Thane, 'Family Life and "Normality" in Post-war British Culture' in R. Bessel and D. Schumann (eds), *Life After Death. Approaches to a Cultural and Social History of Europe during the 1940s and 1950s* (Cambridge 2003), 198.

60 M. Anderson, 'The Emergence of the Modern Life Cycle in Britain', *Social History*, 10, 1 (1985), 69–87.

61 A. Hughes and K. Hunt, 'A Culture Transformed? Women's Lives in Wythenshawe in the 1930s' in A. Davies and S. Fielding (eds), *Workers' Worlds. Culture and Communities in Manchester and Salford, 1880–1939* (Manchester 1992), 90.

62 M. Tebbutt, *Women's Talk? A Social History of 'Gossip' in Working-class Neighbourhoods, 1880–1960* (Aldershot 1995).

63 Mass-Observation, *An Enquiry into People's Homes*, op. cit., 171.

Hoggart, referring to the years either side of the war, suggested that:

The hearth is reserved for the family, whether living at home or nearby, and those who are 'something to us', and look in for a talk or just to sit. Much of the free time of a man and his wife will usually be passed at that hearth; 'just staying-in' is still one of the most common leisure-time occupations.<sup>64</sup>

Moreover, as with other aspects of postwar domesticity, there was a degree of instrumentality in adopting new patterns of living while maintaining aspects of the old. Melanie Tebbutt, for example, rejects a view of the new estates of both the 1930s and 1950s as necessarily less 'social' than other patterns of housing.<sup>65</sup> One interviewee recalled a real sense of 'community' on the new estate where she lived in the 1950s: 'You could always depend on, if you wanted any help there was always a neighbour would help out with something. And it was a very close community.'<sup>66</sup> Indeed, the very factors that are often seen as integral to the home-centred society, such as private gardens, could themselves inculcate a sense of community, as another interviewee recalled:

We paid a shilling a week into a fund and we bought a lawnmower that was communal property and a wheelbarrow and gardening tools. And shared them out between us and sort of dug one another's gardens over, you know to get them done quickly.<sup>67</sup>

In particular, mothers used child-related activities to make social contacts and in doing so maintained relationships outside the home:

And the kids played in the garden with one another cos they had plenty of friends, cos everyone was the same kind of thing. And we had the school run, we used to take it in turns to take half a dozen kids to school. Bring them home at lunchtime and take them back again and bring them home at home time. But we did turns each so we didn't have the same thing to do every day. There'd be a little crowd of mothers at the school gate waiting for them.<sup>68</sup>

The woman-centred neighbourhood networks that provided mutual aid and support for families in the years before the second world war were, in this respect, reconstituted for a new era.<sup>69</sup>

And yet a trend towards a more home-based leisure and increasingly more home-centred patterns of consumption did deepen in the postwar years. As one male respondent to a recent Mass-Observation directive on 'memories and

64 Hoggart, op. cit., 35.

65 Tebbutt, op. cit., 154.

66 Interview with Irene, 1994. Irene was a working-class woman born in Manchester in 1922 who married in 1952 and had two children.

67 Interview with Hannah, 1994.

68 Ibid.

69 On neighbourhood networks in the interwar period see E. Roberts, *A Woman's Place. An Oral History of Working-class Women, 1890–1940* (Oxford 1984). On the postwar years see M. Clapson, 'Working-class Women's Experiences of Moving to New Housing Estates in England since 1919', *20th Century British History*, 10, 3 (1999), 345.

images of the 1950s' asserted: 'Our interests lay entirely in our home which we had just moved into and our marriage which had just begun . . . our own entertainment was family games and the wireless programmes, our home and garden were all-consuming.'<sup>70</sup>

Rising living standards, decreasing hours of paid work and improved housing provision for many heralded the triumph of domestic forms of leisure: the phenomenal rise of television and simultaneous decline of the cinema being only one example. While just 4.3 per cent of the population owned a television set in 1950, 81.8 per cent possessed one a decade later.<sup>71</sup> Yet home-based leisure was never unproblematic leisure as far as most women and some men were concerned. As home-based and 'family' leisure gained ascendancy over alternative leisure habits, the creation of a comfortable site for other family members to enjoy themselves became an important aspect of domestic *work*. Home-based leisure was a form of leisure that needed to be serviced.<sup>72</sup>

Interest in the appearance of the postwar home was intense and was itself a site where work and leisure as well as education and entertainment intersected. For example, ever-increasing attention was paid to home aesthetics in women's magazines and wide-ranging advice on home design was offered to readers. The popularity of the Britain Can Make It exhibition, which attracted over a million people, provides additional evidence of this interest in aesthetics: 92 per cent of those leaving the exhibition told Mass-Observation that they would recommend it to their friends.<sup>73</sup> Despite the absence of prices for goods displayed and the widespread understanding that 'Britain can make it, but not get it',<sup>74</sup> the exhibition seemed highly effective in fuelling and directing the desire for better-looking homes, at least amongst the 'artisan class' who formed a disproportionate percentage of the visitors. As Mass-Observation noted: 'A number of people mention that they now realise how shabby their own homes are. . . . In some cases it seems that a long-established satisfaction with homes has been disturbed.'<sup>75</sup> The central attraction for visitors were the furnished rooms, and although half of the visitors claimed that their tastes had not been changed by their visit to the exhibition, subsequent research visits to interviewees' homes suggested that the exhibition rarely failed to exert some degree of influence in terms of desired change if not actual alteration.<sup>76</sup>

The 1946 exhibition provides an early example of attempts made by postwar design experts to mould public taste. Five years later, the avowedly forward-looking Festival of Britain performed a similar function. Designed both as a 'tonic to the nation' and 'proclamation of national recovery' the exhibition of May–September 1951 showcased new talent in the arts and

70 M-OA, DR, Spring 2003, 'Television and Images of the 1950s and 1960s', Men no. G2134.

71 A.H. Halsey (ed.), *Trends in British Society Since 1900* (Basingstoke 1972), 552.

72 Langhamer, op. cit., 133–45.

73 M-OA, FR 2441, Section A, 15.

74 Ibid.

75 M-OA, FR 2441, Section B, 21.

76 Ibid., 28.



sciences while providing a national celebration to mark the centenary of the Great Exhibition. The Festival placed popular education in 'culture' at its centre; the household was to be the key site of learning.<sup>77</sup> As in 1946, the Festival planners attempted to communicate expert ideas about the design of everyday household goods and homes to the general public. Within a country emerging from postwar austerity and the immediate housing crisis there was, however, more scope than in 1946 to shape actual consumer practices.<sup>78</sup> The 'Live Architecture Exhibition' in the East End of London presented a 'scientifically'-built estate in explicit contrast to the slums of the past. The Festival's Land and Sea Travelling Exhibitions, through which the London Exhibition was diffused throughout the country, included a section on 'People at Home', wherein domestic problems were shown to be resolvable through the combined efforts of designer and scientist. The Festival's Battersea Pleasure Gardens provided luxury goods for sale, implicitly guiding its visitors in appropriate styles of consumption. A particular domestic design vision therefore permeated the Festival of 1951 and framed its reception.<sup>79</sup>

Certainly, new *types* of housing encouraged owners and tenants to engage in home-improvement and gardening in their so-called 'leisure' time. 'Home-making' in its most literal form became a significant pastime for some, though not all, men. Young and Willmott claimed that the men who made the move from Bethnal Green to 'Greenleigh' increasingly operated within a mode of companionate marriage:

We can see that husbands not only do more to aid their wives in emergencies; they also spend less on themselves and more on their families. When they watch the television instead of drinking beer in the pub, and weed the garden instead of going to a football match, the husbands of Greenleigh have taken a stage further the partnership mentioned in an earlier chapter as one of the characteristics of modern Bethnal Green. The 'home' and the family of marriage becomes the focus of a man's life, as of his wife's, far more completely than in the East End.<sup>80</sup>

In a later study of the middle-class suburb of Woodford, the same authors claimed to find husbands who were 'as busy keeping up with rapidly changing fashions of interior decoration and design as his wife is kept absorbed in conforming to rising and ever-changing standards of child-care, cookery and dress. More money is used for the house, more leisure used for work.'<sup>81</sup>

The universality of this reformed model of masculinity, and indeed the veracity of the research upon which it is based, has been questioned.<sup>82</sup> If a reformed

77 B. Conekin, *'The Autobiography of a Nation'. The 1951 Festival of Britain* (Manchester 2003), 49.

78 *Ibid.*, 49.

79 *Ibid.*, 51.

80 Young and Willmott, *op. cit.*, 145.

81 P. Willmott and M. Young, *Family and Class in a London Suburb* (London 1960), 33.

82 J. Finch and P. Summerfield, 'Social Reconstruction and the Emergence of Companionate Marriage, 1945–59' in D. Clark (ed.), *Marriage, Domestic Life and Social Change. Writings for Jacqueline Burgoyne (1944–88)* (London 1991), 23.



domesticated masculinity did exist it was certainly cut through by differences of generation, occupation and social identity and framed by the specificities of individual relationship networks. For example, Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter's study of the 'Ashton' mining community in Yorkshire observed that:

A man's centres of activity are *outside* his home; it is outside his home that are located the criteria of success and social acceptance. He works and plays, and makes contact with other men and women, *outside* his home. The comedian who defined 'home' as 'the place where you fill the pools in on a Wednesday night' was something of a sociologist.<sup>83</sup>

It has recently been suggested that the 'family man' of the 1940s and 1950s was neither an unconditional nor an entirely secure masculine identity; it was certainly not a universal one.<sup>84</sup> Nonetheless, a close relationship undoubtedly existed between the changing nature of housing, home, family life and experiences of leisure. As Constantine notes in his study of amateur gardening, 'the re-building of British cities in this century has had a profound effect on the leisure activities of that large section of the population which was involved'.<sup>85</sup> The nature of housing provision did not directly *cause* a shift towards home-centred leisure but it reflected, reinforced and enabled developing trends to reach fruition.

In addition to acting as a location for leisure and leisure work, the postwar home was also a site of consumption. Yet postwar consumer dreams had their roots in an earlier period. In the 1930s, advertisements for domestic products promised domestic harmony, comfort and the minimization of labour. For example, 'Triplex Grates' were advertised as follows: 'Lucky young woman, she's starting 1937 with her best wish come true. There's a sparkle in her eyes as she surveys the handsome new Triplex. . . . Three hundred and sixty-five days of luxury and leisure ahead of her.'<sup>86</sup> By 1945 *Picture Post* offered 'a foretaste of some of the things the post-war home may have . . . one day: they are American ideas in design for comfort and labour saving'.<sup>87</sup> The goods presented included a transparent lunch box, a fly screen and a chair designed to give '100 per cent comfort'. More ambitious desires achieved partial realization in the 1950s and it was women who were deemed responsible for orchestrating domestic consumption. As well as acting as the guardians of home and family leisure, women were charged with choosing and purchasing for the house. Yet women did not consume passively.<sup>88</sup> Instead, they invested

83 Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter, op. cit., 180. Emphasis in the original.

84 M. Francis, 'The Domestication of the Male? Recent Research on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century British Masculinity', *The Historical Journal*, 45, 3 (2002), 645.

85 S. Constantine, 'Amateur Gardening and Popular Recreation in the 19th and 20th Centuries', *Journal of Social History*, 14, 3 (Spring 1981), 401.

86 *Good Housekeeping*, 30, 5 (January 1937), 87.

87 *Picture Post*, 26, 6, 10 February 1945, 22.

88 A. Partington, 'The Designer Housewife in the 1950s' in J. Attfield and P. Kirkham (eds), *A View from the Interior. Women and Design* (London 1995).

their own meanings in designed goods, meanings which were sometimes at odds with the producer's intent, if necessary ignoring design dictates to produce a domestic look that was simultaneously modern, reassuringly cosy and, above all, practical. As one visitor to the Britain Can Make It exhibition observed of the domestic appliances section: 'Oh, I'm just interested in washing machines, and anything that makes life easier for the housewife. This section is really the most important for the housewife.'<sup>89</sup> Commenting on attitudes towards the furniture exhibited, Mass-Observation found that aesthetic and practical considerations balanced each other out.<sup>90</sup> Despite the vigour with which 'modern' interior design and furnishings were promoted, they rarely achieved a total victory within the aesthetics of everyday postwar homes: the dialogue between old and new continued and it was the 'chooser and spender' wife who mediated between the two.

How, then, did individual men and women understand and negotiate their domestic lives in the postwar period and to what extent did these understandings differ from those of previous decades? The modern life cycle outlined above ensured that during the middle years of the twentieth century, gender roles were in a state of transition, with men and women working out new ways of living within a historically-distinct family framework. Revision and negotiation, rather than acceptance and acquiescence, are perhaps the most helpful way of understanding gender relations in this period. Certainly, the assumption that postwar domesticity and 'traditional' gender roles were mutually reinforcing needs to be challenged.

First, to what extent did the postwar period witness the emergence of a 'new man' as suggested by Abrams? We have already seen that the emergence of masculine home-making accompanied the emergence of new forms of housing. Combined with a reduction in working hours and increases in real incomes, new housing forms also encouraged an expansion of house-work for men, albeit an expansion mediated by gendered discourses of appropriateness.<sup>91</sup> Distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable male housework remained of real significance. So, for example, when Mass-Observation asked its panelists to describe the household jobs most usually performed by men in 1948, they provided the following list: mending and fixing, carrying the coal, chopping firewood, lighting the fire, washing up, table-setting and window-cleaning.<sup>92</sup> All of these were, of course, time-limited jobs rather than more expansive responsibilities. Nonetheless, some men were engaged in the work of childcare and other more routine domestic chores, as one respondent to the 2003 Mass-Observation Directive recalled:

89 M-OA, FR 2441, Section C, 14.

90 Ibid., 25–32.

91 J. Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain, 1890–1960. Gender, Class and Ethnicity* (London 1994), 81–94.

92 M-OA, DR, March/April 1948, 'Housework'.

In my early married life I used to come home at night to a pile of soiled napkins which I washed and wrung by hand. My wife kept the sheets for my return so that we could wring them out together. How we should have welcomed a spin-dryer.<sup>93</sup>

Hoggart certainly claimed to identify a measured change over time amongst working-class couples:

Among some younger husbands there are signs of a striking change in the basic attitude. . . . Some working-class husbands will share the washing up if their wives go out to work, or will take turns with the baby if their job releases them early and not too tired. But many wives come home from work just as tired as their husbands and 'set to' to do all the housework without help from them. And not many working-class husbands will help their wives by pushing the baby round the streets in its pram. That is still thought 'soft', and most wives would sympathise with the view.<sup>94</sup>

As we have already seen, other social surveys, notably those rooted in areas of heavy industry, identified the maintenance of more rigid gender roles.<sup>95</sup> Nonetheless, it seems accurate to conclude that there was an increasingly active masculine role within postwar domesticity, albeit within a wider framework of continuity in female responsibility for actually running the home.

Recent work has largely moved away from an understanding of domesticity as necessarily a source of oppression for women. Instead, domesticity is increasingly viewed as a rational choice for women, a possible source of delight and an opportunity to exercise real skill.<sup>96</sup> It was also a discourse that explicitly differentiated between the identities of migrant and indigenous women.<sup>97</sup> Yet while domesticity might be embraced, it was rarely done so in an unmediated way: women contested and refined it to suit their own conception of 'home'.

'Home management', as *The Housewife's Pocket Book* of 1953 explained, 'is not an easy job, and unless a little thought is given to organising, it can easily become sheer drudgery, with everything in a muddle and the work never done.'<sup>98</sup> Moreover, 'Home-making is an art about which one can never know enough. It is quite the most important of all human activities, and however well it is done it can always be done just a little better, thereby bringing to life an even greater richness.'<sup>99</sup> In these two statements this domestic manual suggests the grounds for potential disgruntlement, the ever-increasing capacity of the domestic role to expand, and asserts its fundamental value within society. A recent study of 1950s American cookbooks suggests that close readings of domestic texts can reveal more than an unchallenged discourse of

93 M-OA, DR, Spring 2003, 'Television and Images of the 1950s and 1960s', Men no. K1515.

94 Hoggart, op. cit., 57.

95 See, for example, Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter, op. cit.

96 J. Bourke, 'Housewifery in Working Class England, 1860–1914', *Past and Present*, 143, (May 1994), 167–97; Giles, op. cit.; Light, op. cit., 217–21.

97 Webster, op. cit.

98 *The Housewife's Pocket Book* (London 1953), 11.

99 Ibid.

domestic conformity. They can, in fact, suggest contradictions and anxieties by articulating 'what must *not* be articulated but assumed, in order to maintain "traditional" gender roles'.<sup>100</sup> Certainly, the definitional tension between art and drudgery alluded to in the *Pocket Book* provided the basis for contentment *and* discontentment with postwar domesticity.

When asked about their postwar experiences, women rarely fail to express pleasure in at least some aspects of their domestic work. As one working-class interviewee explained:

I think it's just that I did just enjoy, I just enjoyed having it nice and putting your nice tea set out and that sort of thing, you know. It was all part of the pleasure. . . . This home making thing to me was nice, you know.<sup>101</sup>

It is also clear that women developed strategies to evade those aspects of the job that they most disliked, as the following extract demonstrates:

My bugbear the stairs (laughs) cleaning them. Oh I used to hate vaccing the stairs, used to do everything and then I'd say to Dennis, now I've done it all, I've only the stairs to do when I come back. So I'd know that when I'd come back he'd've done the stairs (laughs) He never cottoned on (laughs) Never cottoned on.<sup>102</sup>

Nonetheless, as the spread in ownership of labour-saving devices was only partial even at the end of the 1950s, housework remained physically-demanding work; work which daughters observed with increasing disdain. A central motif within much life history material and works of fiction which illuminate the process of growing up in 1950s Britain is a refusal to accept home life as then constructed. Whether we consider the writings of the Angry Young Men or the reflections of those who later benefited from the emergence of 'second wave' feminism in the late 1960s, a construction of 1950s domesticity as oppressive and stultifying has stuck hard. As Angela Carter put it: 'I grew up in the fifties — that is, I was twenty in the 1960s, and, by God, I *deserved* what happened later. It was tough, in the fifties. Girls wore white gloves.'<sup>103</sup>

Yet, a desire for a different kind of life is not absent from sources which document girls growing up in the 1940s and, indeed, the preceding decade. In her study of young women on the cusp of adulthood, conducted in 1945, Pearl Jephcott described the aspirations of working-class girls, moulded by their own experience of overcrowded homes and lack of privacy:

100 J. Neuhaus, 'The Way to a Man's Heart. Gender Roles, Domestic Ideology and Cookbooks in the 1950s', *Journal of Social History*, 32, 3 (1999), 547.

101 Interview with Jean, 1994. Jean was born in 1930, married in 1955 and had two children.

102 Interview with Ivy, 1994. Ivy was born in 1920 to working-class parents, married in 1943 and had three children.

103 A. Carter, 'Truly It Felt Like Year One' in S. Maitland (ed.), *Very Heaven. Looking back at the 1960s* (London 1988).

The intelligent girls realize how much the badly planned, over-packed home has added to their mother's work, which, in the mining families, is normally heavy. The girls know at first-hand how difficult it is to bring up children satisfactorily under such conditions. They realize what extra effort an additional child causes and what difficulties even minor illnesses may add. They have seen and shared these burdens for all their eighteen years and they do not intend, if they can avoid it, to have a similar life for themselves.<sup>104</sup>

Work on youthful lives in interwar Britain has shown that a combination of new job opportunities, increased disposable income and access to commercial leisure inculcated a sense of freedom and independence in young British women which marked their youthful years as different from those of their mothers.<sup>105</sup> Certainly, it has been suggested that girls, rather than boys, were the driving force behind an interwar 'teenage' culture.<sup>106</sup> A re-formed marriage relationship, and through this, access to a home of one's own, was often constructed as a way of escaping the fate of the mother.<sup>107</sup> The limitation of family size was central to a sense of control over that home. Thus, while girls who grew up in the 1950s might position themselves against domesticity per se, earlier cohorts positioned themselves against domestic *drudgery*, making informed choices which they hoped would enable them to avoid the kind of life led by their mothers.

However, it was not just young women and men who expressed their discontent with domesticity in the postwar years. For some adult working-class women, dreams of domestic life conflicted with the everyday reality: domesticity 1950s-style differed from the pre-war fantasy in a number of respects. Within an era often defined as one in which the domestic was privileged, the status of domestic work actually fell sharply. Whilst domesticity as imagined in the interwar period was a full-time, modern profession, in the postwar period other pressures drew women outside the home in increasing numbers. Between 1931 and 1951, the proportion of women in employment aged between 35 and 59 jumped from 26 per cent to 43 per cent.<sup>108</sup> The rise in labour market participation amongst married women actually led to a reduction in the status attached to home-making. A general perception that married women's wages were now used to buy 'extras' for the family, rather than to ensure survival, undermined the importance of their contribution to the family economy, despite the fact that for some women paid labour remained a pressing necessity. Moreover, working-class woman's traditional skills of managing, making and budgeting became less valued in an age of consumer goods and rising incomes.<sup>109</sup>

104 P. Jephcott, *Rising Twenty* (London 1948), 37–8.

105 Langhamer, op. cit.

106 K. Milcoy, 'Image and Reality. Working-class Teenage Girls' Leisure in Bermondsey during the Interwar Years', DPhil thesis, University of Sussex, 2000, 225.

107 J. White, *The Worst Street in North London. Campbell Bunk, Islington, between the Wars* (London 1986), 197.

108 Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain*, 99.

109 Roberts, op cit., 92.

For middle-class women, too, domesticity failed to deliver what it promised: a skilled and 'scientific' role became, in the absence of domestic servants after the war, a commitment to chores which their mothers would have employed other women to perform. Some contemporary commentators claimed to identify in the person of the middle-class housewife a vivid illustration of a more general levelling-down of class difference. Ruth Bowley, for example, asked *Picture Post* readers in 1949, 'Is the Middle Class Doomed?', suggesting that:

Today, the middle-class wife and the council-flat wife queue side by side for the fish. Later, they may meet again at the doctors' surgery. They may wait together outside the primary school playground. Both wear utility coats, and carry heavy shopping bags. And their hands show the same story of potatoes peeled and floors scrubbed.<sup>110</sup>

In fact, recent work reveals that, faced with a discourse of classlessness, middle-class women attempted to mark out their own identities within the category 'housewife' by emphasizing 'creative homemaking' over 'the rough' of household maintenance.<sup>111</sup>

Across classes, the promised professional and respected modern occupation became, in reality, a part-time job that could be combined with other, also under-valued, part-time jobs. The fact that this re-conceptualization followed a period when both unpaid and paid work had been presented as valuable war work must have made the transition all the more painful. A combination of the unravelling of the construction of housewifery as a full-time occupation, the social isolation felt by some housewives within their new homes and the new domestic labours that middle-class women found themselves expected to perform, led some women to feel cheated of the value that had been placed on their work. 'They see marriage as a full-time career, and they want, literally, to make a job of it', observed Pearl Jephcott of the girls she surveyed at the end of the war. 'It is a matter of principle, even with those girls who are maddeningly irresponsible in every other way, that a woman's first duty is to look after her own home.'<sup>112</sup>

Modern domesticity reached maturity in the postwar period but the demographic trends which framed the emergence of Abrams's 'home-centred society' and the aspirations which fuelled material reality pre-dated the Cold War era. The second world war did not, of itself, *create* a desire to retreat into the private world of home, although it undoubtedly fired pre-existing desires. In this way, the postwar narrative of new beginnings and historically-distinct lifestyles neglects significant aspects of pre-war domestic life across social classes. As Conekin et al. put it, 'The modern in this period was a hybrid

110 *Picture Post*, 43, 10, 4 June 1949, 13.

111 J. Giles, 'Help for Housewives. Domestic Service and the Reconstruction of Domesticity in Britain, 1940–1950', *Women's History Review*, 10, 2 (2001), 299–332.

112 Jephcott, op. cit., 72.



affair, assembled out of tales about the past as well as narratives of the future.’<sup>113</sup>

Certainly, there was much that was new in the years after the second world war: postwar affluence was undoubtedly a central factor in enabling modern domesticity to take hold; new housing stock provided more than simply a location for the home-centred lifestyle, and the memory of war heightened a desire for domestic stability. But domestic fantasies were themselves established prior to the war and were informed by the knowledge that smaller family size had already fundamentally altered the nature of family life in Britain. While family size continued to decline beyond the period examined here, by the 1970s the ‘golden age’ of stable, near universal marriage was over as marriage rates dropped and divorce rates spiralled. To this extent the home-centred society discussed in this article was historically specific to the central years of the twentieth century.

Yet, home-centredness was never a uniform experience: the significant numbers who lacked homes of their own even at the end of the 1950s attest to this. As we have seen, significant numbers of households entered the 1960s without the privacy, comfort or labour-saving consumer durables which have become characteristic of the ‘affluent’ society. Nor was the domesticity upon which home-centredness was founded entirely uncontested. Both men and women had reasons to suspect that the material reality that followed earlier dreams was not quite what they had anticipated. Young women in particular expressed a reluctance to acquiesce in the new consumption-defined domesticity, while adult women could be forgiven for thinking that the reality of postwar domesticity did not live up to its earlier promise.

When Mass-Observation asked for memories and recollections of the 1950s in spring 2003, popular memories of this period were cut through by gender. Amongst men, home and domestic life were infrequently explicitly central to reconstructions of the past. The narratives they offered suggest myriad other ways of reading the postwar period: safety, order, respect for others, simplicity and a less frenetic pace of life are constructed as key characteristics. For example, a 69-year-old man described ‘a more ordered, well mannered, considerate and leisurely way of life . . . it was less hectic, we had more time to enjoy leisure, there was full employment, we were more polite and considerate to each other, people could be seen smiling in the street, they looked and were happier, both poor and rich’.<sup>114</sup> Another observed that ‘life was not driven by commercialisation’.<sup>115</sup> Such responses clearly speak to contemporary concerns about, for example, crime, violence and the individualization of everyday life and are refracted through the rapid social, cultural and political changes that accompanied the last years of the twentieth century. They also warn us against

113 B. Conekin, F. Mort and C. Waters (eds), *Moments of Modernity. Reconstructing Britain 1945–1964* (London 1999), 3.

114 M-OA, DR Spring 2003, ‘Television and Images of the 1950s and 1960s’, Men no. A883.

115 Ibid., Men no. B1426.



assigning undue dominance to domesticity as *the* defining feature of the post-war world. Nonetheless, while many women offered similar reconstructions, speaking of 'safety, security and familiarity',<sup>116</sup> others conjured up dominant memories more explicitly rooted within the home, such as the intricacies of domestic labour, the routines of family life and the aesthetics of the 1950s house. Such gendered reconstructions of the past should not, of course, surprise: home exercises a more powerful historical pull on the memories of those who worked within it. Moreover, even those conceptualizations of the post-war period which do not explicitly place home at their centre speak to notions of 'home' implicitly in their evocation of stability and security.

When locating the postwar years within a longer historical trajectory, Mass-Observers of both genders tended to locate the 1950s in a continuum with the pre-war period. As one respondent put it: 'What does strike me is that the period I grew up in — say mid-fifties to mid-seventies — was in many ways far more similar to the period my parents grew up in — the mid-twenties to mid-forties — than to the world today, another 30 years on.'<sup>117</sup> Consideration of the postwar home should encourage historians of twentieth-century Britain to explore further the dynamic relationship between the 1930s and the 1950s: not to identify a postwar return to 'traditional' models but to unravel the complex manner in which dreams first dreamt before the second world war were realized, adapted or rejected in the Cold War era. While home life in the 1950s was not an unproblematic return to earlier patterns, neither was it sufficiently distinct from interwar experiences to be viewed as a 'new' model of living.

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116 Ibid., Women no. A2212.

117 Ibid., Women no. B2948.